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Excerpt from Pain According to Matteo.

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PAIN ACCORDING
TO MATTEO

excerpt translated by
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Pain According to Matteo
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PLOWED FIELDS

“The world isn’t made up of elementary particles, or molecules, or whatever you want to call them,” Filippo said to me. “It’s made up of actions.” I didn’t understand. All I’d asked him was whether he thought it was a good idea to continue our regular morning routine. Actually, my question had been much more indirect than that, but clearly he’d been expecting some such observation from me for a while now.

“Actions constitute the structural basis of human relations, they link individuals together, they prevent things from falling apart. For the past five thousand years or so, they’ve been the double-edged sword that distinguishes man from the beasts.”

“Of course,” I said.

“I’m talking about the symbolic level, you understand. Let’s imagine a married couple,” he elaborated. “Husband

and wife: every day, they go to sleep side by side, sharing the same bed, fully aware that they will repeat this same action until the day they die, because it is the ultimate essence of their pact, their alliance. It doesn't matter whether they make love, it matters even less that he may from time to time dream of loving another woman, what matters is that they will prepare a bed and together they will face each night of darkness together, falling asleep, side by side, just as they do every evening. You understand? It's the only way that they can ground their sense of reality on a solid footing. Or, to take another example, let's say you go to a demonstration..."

"I've never been to a demonstration in my life."

"Oh... well, anyway... you're not going to the demonstration because it really serves some higher purpose, you go to perform that gesture, that action: you go to keep your world intact. And it's the same thing for me: if I stopped giving you a blowjob every morning, the universe would fall apart, complete disintegration would ensue, the end of all social cohesion. In other words, a mess, a total and pointless mess."

Naturally, I said nothing in response. We were sitting on a bench, a few blocks away from the funeral parlor. The sky was dense, thinning out toward the horizon like the skies of the north. I was still slightly stunned from the alcohol I'd consumed the night before, and I couldn't venture anything more than my calm and courteous smile.

"Do you like Claudia?"

"..."

"Fuck, Matteo answer when someone asks you a question!"

"Sure, I like her."

"You know perfectly well that your relationship with her isn't going anywhere, don't you?"

"I'm not interested in going anywhere."

"That's not true, everyone wants..."

"Listen, Filippo. Do you remember the first time we met? I was just coming home from a wedding, and you offered me a job in a funeral parlor, which was the most irrational thing that I could do, and I accepted without even thinking it over. Does it really strike you that I'm interested in going somewhere?" I wasn't being a hundred percent truthful, because working in that funeral parlor was the only thing that had ever given me a sense of direction in my life. Of course, I didn't see it as a path, but rather as a slow discovery. But my thoughts have always been mutilated, "pretextual," as my mother says; they adapt to reality without causing trouble, without acting out. Unlike Filippo, I believe that this is the difference between man and animal, the capacity to fool oneself, to test the ground and always to find a functional beauty. Humans adapt to everything, they learn to sow and reap and they are happy with their harvest, whatever it might be. They could cultivate shit, nothing would change. Filippo thinks that he can avoid accepting this, but in reality he has always taken to his heels at harvest time, he has always abandoned the plowed fields, he has inundated the land of abundance with cancerous water, and he has never allowed himself to give in to regret. But now, as he was speaking to me, he seemed to be at the point of rethinking matters, he looked at me with elvish eyes, his effeminacy has only been exacerbated by an effort not to give up, the exuberance of the last-ditch effort, the pride that goes before a fall.

THE UNDERWORLD DOMAIN

My encounters with Claudia had continued with the reliability of secret meetings; I believe that the mere fact that we were both more or less living in captivity drove her to seek me out continuously. Moreover, it would be wrong to underestimate the magnificence of our beginning. She thought of me as a divine messenger dispatched on an urgent mission from his underworld domain to restore her to life. I wasn't required to do a thing. It was sufficient not to act, and Claudia felt reassured and contented. She, in contrast, lavished all her energy and efforts on behalf of the cause, devising an endless succession of self-flagellating rituals, awaiting with docility my non-intervention. The danger, though, is that humiliation, endlessly renewed, can carry one dangerously toward a slow entropy. Claudia began to sense this, but it still struck her as the best compromise, given the circumstances. From what she told me,

she'd broken off all sexual relations with Alberto. She'd explained to him that, with marriage looming closer, she was reluctant to run the risk of tainting her decision with anything as unmanageable as sex. Both of them would have to make a special effort to project their love upward and outward—above and beyond the body. That was the one way to be sure that they were destined one for the other. Alberto had swallowed it, hook line and sinker, in part because Claudia seemed much calmer and far more balanced than before; she emitted a strange aura of lucidity, made up of sweet phrases and unwavering smiles; her gaze had actually become meek and compliant. She was finally his betrothed, the virgin that he yearned to caress, walking arm-in-arm, protecting her as they made their way through the days of turmoil prior to the great event.

Claudia would call me on the phone, and I'd go to her apartment. There I'd find her naked, on all fours, tied to the door handle, or with her face thrust into the toilet bowl, or else in the middle of the living room, positioned as if she were a footrest. She'd fix me a drink, shuffling on her knees from one part of the apartment to the other, she'd hasten after me like a bloodhound whenever I moved, poised, her tongue hanging out, expecting something in exchange. We never talked about anything. I was accustomed to the smell of her apartment, the way you become accustomed to the smells of a beach town; I'd cross the threshold of her apartment and find myself in a hotel out of town, with a woman available for my personal use, included as part of the vacation package. In the realm of unhappiness, Claudia recognized only those miseries that resembled her own, she had never learned to look anyone in the eye, I mean that literally, the game she played always

led her to cast her gaze downward, staring for hours at the motionless surface of the floor. This tragic resignation of hers was the most intransigent form of selfishness that I had ever encountered. There was no room for anything else: once she had transformed you into a god, you were left with the barren consolation of omnipotence, and all the boredom that came with it. We engaged in actual carnal sex relatively rarely, in terms of penetration, coitus. Sometimes I'd approach her from behind and take her as she wailed, with her usual modulated noises, then I'd come and abandon her, moaning, on the floor. She expected me to "take it up a notch," to indulge in the delights of sadism and sexual abuse, but I never did. She lay there, curled up in a ball, waiting for me to surrender. She couldn't accept the fact that I refused to relish my power to its full extent, that I'd never raped her, never insulted her, never whipped her, never invented a language of my own to match hers, a language of complete mastery and dominance. I just never said a word, that's all.

As time went by, her apartment was turning into a place of farewell, much of the furniture had already been moved to the future home of the couple-to-be, the fridge was always empty, everything was covered with dust. It was impossible in that place to keep from feeling that you were guilty of something, it felt like the scene of a murder, years later, when even death has been accepted and all that is sought are forms of commemoration. But I couldn't manage to feel fully guilty, I was never given that opportunity, omnipotence strips you of free will.

We almost never saw one another outside of her apartment, and when it did happen it was because she needed to let off steam. She'd talk to me about Alberto and his expec-

tations, and about her mother, who'd just given up on life after her father died. She was afraid that she would meet the same fate, she feared that one day she'd discover that she was in love with her husband, but it would be too late. I had no difficulty believing that: Claudia was capable of love only in a void, and she did everything she could think of, sparing no effort, to ensure that this void was a real presence in her life. Once she told me that she could only recognize Alberto's features in the dark, that her memory functioned by associations, her memories migrated up over the threshold of the passing months and became present in the very instant that she decided to take her life in her hands and make a commitment. Was she doing the same thing with me? I believe that she was frightened, because—try as she might—she couldn't find the magic spell for the final risk. What more could she ask of me? She had tried without success for months to turn me into a sadist, she wanted me to be the executioner of that abstruse world that she busily planned out in the dark like a meticulous architect, but something had eluded her control, because now she discovered that she had a hangman, a torturer whom she could scarcely control. But the point, perhaps, was what did I want? This point was always left out of the story. I wanted Claudia, I loved her desire for me, her unhappiness; I was intoxicated by that sorrow and pain, a sorrow and pain that I knew was unextinguishable. If I'd seen a way out, I would have become tired of it right away.

Claudia told me that we needed to talk. She asked me to come see her that evening, and simply to be myself. “No games,” she added. When I walked into her apartment, it seemed like everything was appropriately understated, a garish lamp hanging straight down from the ceiling, background music playing so low it was barely audible, and Claudia sitting primly on the sofa, her eyes swollen.

I sat down across from her, reaching out for the watered-down martini that she must have prepared too early.

“So what is this? What are we doing?” she asked.

She was hardly surprised at my failure to respond. For that matter, she had already planned out everything she would say, and she had little need for confirmation or disagreement. She was no longer in love with Alberto—this was her astonishing discovery—and was therefore afraid that she had fallen in love with me.

“Claudia, I believe that you are just dependent on me, if you want to put it that way. Don’t worry, though, dependence is always temporary.”

I was amazed at how lucid I had managed to be, but despite my effort to be understanding, she seemed anything but satisfied.

“Why don’t you ever tell me what you feel? Why the fuck won’t you ever talk to me about yourself, you don’t you ever say anything to me? And why do you keep coming here? What do you want from me?”

The ordinariness of Claudia’s questions, along with a growing note of hysteria in her voice—which for the moment took the form of small rising screeches where question marks ought to go—had an unfortunate effect: I burrowed ever deeper into my mute silence, without a glimmer of hope.

“Ah then, I don’t even deserve an answer?”

The girl was just getting worse with every new accusation, I’d overestimated her, I hadn’t believed she was capable of this sort of interrogation. I’d been through this before and, honestly, with Claudia, I hoped I’d escaped the danger. But, as my mother says, I manage to bring out the worst in people, even though from my point of view, the worst of people is their essence, the rest is just a pantomime of affections and failed loving impulses. In short, I had hit a wall. You should always be wary of those who want to talk to you: it’s clear evidence that they really have nothing to say to you and at the end of the day, those few words, once spoken, swell up in your head and keep you from getting to sleep.

But Claudia wouldn’t give up, in fact, she had become increasingly serious—for her, becoming serious meant sim-

ply furrowing her brow and raising her right eyebrow. In cases like this, form immediately becomes substance.

"Are you in love with me?" she finally blurted out.

"No."

Things were turning ugly.

"Well then tell me this, have you ever been in love with anyone in your life?"

"Listen, Claudia, what's the good of talking about this stuff when you're about to get married? How will it help you? Are you interested in philosophical speculation? Are you trying to understand what love is?"

My frankness continued to produce disastrous effects. Claudia had burst into an orgasmic wave of sobbing. For the first time since I'd met her, I could barely make out in her any beauty at all. Her face was swollen and reddish, her large green eyes were nothing more than a pair of sharp-edged crescent moons, her strangled voice dispensed arrhythmic hacking coughs, while she continued to repeat: "What the fuck are you saying?"

I've never been very good at calming other people down, getting control of situations; I realized that I needed to do something, but that ouch-cube of neurotic syndromes that stood staring at me impatiently was too-overwhelming an adversary.

"I think I'd better leave," I managed to say.

"No, you're not going anywhere."

"I think it would be better for both of us."

"What do you mean better? I don't understand... Matteo, if you walk out of this room, you'll never see me again."

Threats, at least, have the benefit of being structurally resolutory. I knew that wouldn't be the last time I saw

Claudia, but even if I'd been a little less sure of the fact, the idea of getting up from that dusty chair gave me shivers of joy.

Unfortunately, Claudia was incapable of definitive gestures. And so, soon after making the threat, she shifted tactics. She took off her clothes and wriggled across the floor, reaching my feet just as I made it to the front door.

"I love you," she said, lifting her chin from the floor and looking at me once again with those extraordinary eyes that had resumed their natural appearance. She seized my ankles and, deep down, she was hoping that I would move so that she could continue to slither along the floor, holding tight to my feet. Instead, I leaned over and lifted her to her feet, and I said to her:

"Claudia, this isn't the end of the world. Sooner or later, you'll see, we'll figure out what to do."

Fortunately, by this point she had calmed down and she seized my hand in a gesture that expressed trust and hope. We were two adults, after all. Isn't that what people always say?

AN OVERSIZED RING

When I got there, I found her wearing her wedding gown. The first impact was even more unpleasant than I expected. It looked as if she'd spent the last few days weeping uninterruptedly, and covering up the circles under her eyes with indelible foundation. Her face was disfigured, it was the face I would have expected the first time I saw her, when she came into the funeral parlor. Something had happened, her resistance to pain and grief that had preserved her from the decay of the flesh was somehow no longer able to protect her. The pain and sorrow that marked her face had something so worn out and stale about it that it reminded me of her mother. Only her voice continued to stop time, forcing it into that apartment that was by now almost completely empty.

She kissed me as if she'd been waiting her whole life to do it, as if the minutes that had crystallized in that room

were demanding revenge. She said: "I'm yours, I'm yours, I'm yours." Her white dress kept tripping her up and making her stumble. As soon as she recovered her breath, and spoke the word "yours," she'd hurl herself toward me, and the flower-patterned train got caught up between her legs, undermining her balance. She hadn't rehearsed long enough in front of the mirror, and so I took the opportunity to remind her of one of the first things she'd ever said to me: "Nothing comes out of improvisation." But I think that she misunderstood the meaning, because what happened next was that she was in my arms, whispering to me in a voice dripping complicity:

"I know, I know, I know." By now, everything she said was a sequence of repetitions.

"Claudia," I said, "isn't it bad luck to wear your wedding gown before the ceremony?"

"What ceremony are you talking about?" she interrupted brusquely. "The two of us—you and me—are going to be married tonight, everything's ready... come with me."

She took me by the hand and dragged toward the bedroom, which had been transformed into a sort of gas chamber with incense, with a little shrine in the middle of the room, and flower blossoms scattered on the floor.

"Is that a Buddhist altar?" I asked.

"I don't know, what does it matter? It's the best one I could find."

I clung to the topic of Buddhism, trying desperately to steer the conversation in some other direction.

"A friend of mine who was a Buddhist had a little altar that looked exactly like that one. I thought it was just a joke, but it turned out he really believed in that stuff."

"Of course he really believed in it... I really believe in it

too. Matteo I'm not kidding. We are about to get married."

"Isn't it odd that a far greater number of men than women convert to Buddhism? You might not think so, but it's a manly religion. Do you have any girlfriends who turned Buddhist?"

"No, I don't. Matteo, please, cut it out, stop talking about Buddhism. Okay, maybe it actually is a Buddhist altar, I have no idea. I bought it in a Chinese minimart... I assure you, it's not the easiest thing in the world to lay your hands on an altar these days."

"Well, when I was a little boy, I used to wonder why women went into church, what could they be asking God for. I couldn't imagine that they had wishes."

"And what did you wish for?"

"I wanted to meet God, that's what I asked for. I asked God if it would be possible to meet him in person."

I knew that this conversational hijacking wouldn't last long, in part because Claudia had already become suspicious of my sudden burst of chatter. She stepped toward me, with a little velvet cushion upon which she had arranged the two rings. Inside one of the rings, my name was engraved. I picked it up and realized that it was too big for me.

"Claudia," I said, "I'm afraid that you're going to have to exchange this ring. It's too big."

"It doesn't matter, it's only a symbol."

"I see that you are failing to obey me; a good wife must learn to obey her husband."

At that point Claudia smiled with a victorious air; it hadn't been easy—she said to herself—but in the end I did it. Nothing had been wasted, in her view. All those pathetic little scenes that had punctuated her parallel life in recent

weeks and months, all those phone calls, sighs, moans: all that turmoil and upset. The circle was about to become complete, all the signs were falling into place, that's what she must have been thinking at that moment. Her existence was an assemblage of pain and sorrow piled up, massed together, a nucleus ready to implode. And she imagined herself right at the point of the implosion, in the exact center, she could no longer be wrong. The future is now, she kept repeating to herself while that impudent smile flooded, unchecked, across her face. I'd never seen her so happy; to tell the truth I'd never seen anyone so happy. Thinking back on it today, I believe that, all things considered, Claudia should be grateful to me, not everyone has the opportunity to watch as their dreams are made flesh, even if it's only for an instant. Instead, people are weak, and they forget to be grateful. When she finally stopped smiling, she threw herself, exhausted, at my feet. She tottered uncertainly back and forth on the floor, because her train prevented her from genuflecting elegantly, and she said to me:

"Of course, my darling, of course I'll obey you. For as long as I live. For as long as I live..."

"Certainly, I understand, for as long as you live. Now stand up, take off all this stuff, it's unlucky to wear it before the wedding ceremony."

While Claudia stripped off her nuptial diving suit, I began to look around, carefully observing that apartment I knew I'd never see again. I felt the same sense of yearning nostalgia I used to feel during my last few days at the beach. My father was still alive, and even though I couldn't have foreseen his death, it was clear to me that I'd never be returning to this place. I remember that when our

beach-umbrella neighbors said goodbye, they shook my hand. It was the first time anyone had done that. Actually, I was still a child, but those two fatties with their wrinkled wet swimsuits clinging to their oversized bellies had decided to give me an early warning. Sooner or later, people would stop tousling my hair and patting my head, the adult world became evident in the force of that handshake, and soon it would manifest itself in the efficacy of my smile. When I looked at Claudia again, her figure had already moved through all this, my beach-umbrella neighbors were laughing heartily, with the insolent bravado of those who are always right. I wouldn't want to be misunderstood, I'm not trying to say that Claudia and I were preparing to bid a somber farewell to our childhood; if anything, we had bidden farewell to all that, silently, the moment we first met. The two of us, together, had set aside the rhetoric of growing up, that sort of chaste illusion that draws out the web of an affair for years, until the first to abandon it realizes that they have grown up vastly. She and I had leapt completely over that sentimental education, we already knew everything we needed to know, and we had no interest in learning anything more.

THE HISTORY OF CERTAIN DISCOVERIES

It had not been a clumsy oversight. The day that I decided to answer Claudia's call on my phone, it wasn't because she had encrypted her number, making the display read: "number unavailable," but because I was interested in hearing from her. At first, she just seemed embarrassed, she hadn't counted on the possibility that I might suddenly decide to actually answer my phone, and her entire sequence of insults, carefully assembled for days, turned into a single, pliant sigh. When she finally began to speak, it seemed inappropriate to begin a conversation at the exact point where it had been interrupted. The decision not to answer the phone for days at a time in these cases is the best approach, there are no subjects so crucial and powerful that they can remain suspended motionless in midair until the moment in which one is obliged to resume them, and so putting off the thorniest questions is always a guarantee

of a successful communicative dribbling, a simple way of sidestepping the issue, by even the smallest margin—just a tiny dodge is enough to save you. And so Claudia found herself obliged to ask me how my search for a place to live was going, and how many dead people we had buried recently. I calmly responded to both her questions. Until her mechanism of forced transfer finally began to collapse.

“Matteo you’re a shit,” she said, condensing—I imagine—a long string of related ideas. “Did you hear me? Don’t you want to say anything to me? Are you sure? You really don’t have anything to say to me?”

“Agreed,” I replied.

“Agreed what?”

“...”

“Matteo, can you hear me? Agreed what? Agreed that you’re a shit?”

“Hmm.”

“Hmm? And what good is your sense of guilt to me?”

“Pardon me, Claudia, who said anything about a sense of guilt?”

I don’t know why it is that almost all women tend to react to statements or ideas that were actually never expressed, but that they pretend to have heard in order to be able to show all the resentment compatible only with those specific statements. If there is an exquisitely feminine behavior, this must be it: women have a dialectical system that is defective from birth, they formulate their responses too early, and even though ninety percent of the time their proverbial intuition sends them in the correct direction, in the remaining ten percent of all cases, the conversation turns into pure autism, they respond to statements that were never made, and they begin to build up resentment, in

keeping with the original plan. In order to avoid stumbling into such a great waste of logic, I decided to resume control of the conversation—playing the silence card was by this time a less than successful tactic.

“There’s a fundamental misunderstanding in your conception of life,” I said seriously to Claudia, “you can’t fully live the role that you’ve chosen for yourself.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Let’s put things in the simplest possible terms: you’re a masochist, right? Well, in that case Alberto is your ideal man. What’s the true perfect match for a masochist? Not a vulgar sadist, no; really, it would be a person who is likely to deprive the masochist of his or her daily dose of suffering, in such a way that the aspiring masochist is always and inevitably frustrated in his or her desires, which is tantamount to a state of perpetual grace, the only possible condition that will reliably induce a genuine and inextinguishable state of suffering. You should love Alberto, you should be devoted to him for what he is doing for you, he is keeping alive your anxiety and yearning for tribulations. Remember, it was thanks to him that you were down on all fours in front of me, begging me to jam anything I could think of into your asshole, and once you finally get tired of wandering around, asking strangers to use your anus as a black hole, once again you’ll ask Alberto to do it, and he’ll refuse, and you’ll beg him and you’ll suffer and beg him again and he’ll continue to refuse to do it, and then you’ll grab an umbrella and stick it up your ass all by yourself, and you’ll be overjoyed with delight at having gone so far.”

“Matteo, now cut it out, please,” Claudia broke in.

Then she added, in a serious voice: “You were kidding, right?”

Of course, I wasn't kidding. The more serious I am, the more people think I'm kidding. In general, everyone feels certain that I make free use of sarcasm, even though I am absolutely incapable of such a thing. It's a sort of congenital defect, a pathology—you might call it an incapacity to use language in a figurative sense, or if you like, you might describe it as limited intelligence. Any use of language that deviates at all from the literal meaning of the words and phrases is incomprehensible to me: it's a skill that developmentally ought to have been attained around five or six years of age, but I never learned it. My father was the only one who noticed it. In fact, he felt certain that I was retarded, but he died before he was obliged to give up all hope for my future. My mother, on the other hand, never accepted it at all; she immediately became convinced that my ineptitude was an extraordinary quality, a symptom of a profound sensibility and great intellectual honesty. She believed that my straightforward ways were not the product of an inability to engage in abstract thought, but rather a sign of precocious moral rectitude, an exquisite predisposition to criticize the way people lived. Even now, she continues to live on, curled up within that colossal misunderstanding; she respects my judgment above all other things and, in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, she refuses to admit that my view of the world is that of a four-year-old child. I still remember perfectly the day I made this discovery, the day I understood that people are instinctively driven to attribute a greater meaning to my words, and that this greater meaning always goes by the name of sarcasm. I used to have a girlfriend my own age; she was a preadolescent, who had just begun to develop. I remember once when I walked her home from school,

she had asked me to explain a math problem to her, and I had given it my all, I'd worked tirelessly to help her understand. Eleonora, that was her name, took me by the arm and began thanking me over and over again. She kept saying the same word—thank you—and smiling and squeezing my arm tighter and tighter. At that point I asked her, actually expecting an answer:

"If you thank me for that, what would you say if I made you have an orgasm?"

Eleonora felt both offended and excited by my supposed "sarcasm," that is, she felt for the first time what over time becomes the standard reaction of any woman in her interactions with the opposite sex, but she chose to emphasize the offended aspect. She asked me: "Why do you always try to be so provocative?" The solution is right there, in that word: "provoke." People feel that they are being provoked when you say something to them in the most straightforward manner possible, by who can say what odd mechanism people are convinced that in reality you meant to say something else, or else that this provocation is a ploy to introduce the real subject, though it is as clear as day that the real subject is already there, out in the open. But this discovery was immediately overshadowed by a more important discovery. In the years of my adolescence, in that dark period in which every manifestation of the human soul is analyzed and classified purely according to your name and age and height and weight, I too, like all the others, had begun to investigate myself in an attempt to discover what made me different from everyone else. I didn't have far to look. If the subject was talent, there wasn't much to work with; those heartbreaking fantasies that they plant in your head when you're fourteen years old about

your inborn skill at playing the guitar or drawing human figures, pretty much fell into a void with me. Still, I needed to find something, anything, I needed to move into the core of life with a new passport, I needed to say: this is who I am, because this is what I know how to do. It was then that, working relentlessly to scrape the bottom of that middle space that over time we learn to call our subconscious, I finally made my discovery: I was incapable of feeling pain or sorrow. For a while, the discovery lay there, where it had been generated, but then, all of a sudden, I realized that it had become clear to everyone else, even though no one was capable of taking the phenomenon for what it was: a simple fact, a sort of degenerative disease for which, unfortunately, there is no cure. The general belief was that there necessarily had to be some deeper reason underlying the symptom, but the truth is that it was not a symptom, it was itself the reason. In other words, it's as if you went to someone with cancer and told them that the cancer is a symptom of some dark disease. That person would have every reason to assume you were insane. It was the same thing for me: everyone felt obliged to develop their own theories to plumb the underlying reasons for my syndrome: I was an excessively sensitive boy, I was an excessively insensitive boy, it was a form of self-defense, I was engaging in a form of aggressivity, I was sublimating my father's death, I was incapable of sublimating my father's death, I couldn't stand my mother, I loved my mother too much, I was a tough guy, I was introverted, I hated the world, or the world rejected me.

When Claudia said to me for the second time: "Matteo you are a shit," I understood that it wasn't only because she was a woman: the girl had truly lost the gift of dialectal

thought. Too much music therapy can really burn out a brain.

"Listen, why don't you just take things for what they are," I suggested, "we've both had a pretty good time, haven't we? You've been happy, well, what more do you want, now you're ready to move on."

"Matteo, let me remind you, my father just died... what do you mean that I've been happy? I don't want to lose another person, it's because I've been happy that I want to go on being happy forever."

The concept of "forever" is the curse that God chose to lay upon women, to rightly keep them slaves to their men, and to keep alive the joke whereby women were engendered from Adam's rib, and so on. Claudia was certainly doing her duty well, and she never forgot that joke. It was strange, because when my father died, my reaction went in the opposite direction. I had learned a very obvious truth, that is, that lives are always complete in the instant that they end. It is merely an exercise in bad rhetoric to talk of potential, of shortchanging the future, of blocking one's hopes. Every person is a complete person the moment they die, then their life is established, before and after there is nothing else. From that moment forward, the very concept of future no longer constituted any mystical evocation, much less a despairing disquiet. It had simply stopped existing. And so when Claudia brought out her "forever" I decided to hang up on her, in order to provide her with an empirical demonstration that nothing can cross the phantasmagorical boundaries of time, and that a telephone call deserves its name until the precise moment in which one of the two parties hangs up the receiver.